

2009

## Did the Hakka Save China? Ethnicity, Identity, and Minority Status in China's Modern Transformation

P. Richard Bohr

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, [rbohr@csbsju.edu](mailto:rbohr@csbsju.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/headwaters>



Part of the [Asian History Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Bohr, P. Richard (2009) "Did the Hakka Save China? Ethnicity, Identity, and Minority Status in China's Modern Transformation," *Headwaters*: Vol. 26, 10-18.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.csbsju.edu/headwaters/vol26/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. It has been accepted for inclusion in Headwaters by an authorized editor of DigitalCommons@CSB/SJU. For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@csbsju.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@csbsju.edu).

# Did the Hakka Save China?

## Ethnicity, Identity, and Minority Status in China's Modern Transformation

China's modern transformation is the epic story of the Hakka. The Hakka's sixteen centuries of sojourning through China and the world have brought forth unique ideals and institutions, which, coinciding with momentous domestic and global forces during the past two centuries, have remade China in revolutionary ways. This revolution began with Hong Xiuquan's Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of 1851–64, continued with Sun Yat-sen's Republican Revolution of 1911 and Mao Zedong's Communist Revolution of 1949, and has taken yet another step forward as the Hakka, China, and the world seek a common destiny in the globalizing twenty-first, or "Chinese" century.

### The Hakka Inspire the Taiping Revolution (1851–64)

#### *The Hakka Background*

The Taiping Revolution originated with Hong Xiuquan, who grew up in a Hakka village thirty miles north of Guangzhou (Canton) in southwest Guangdong province. Like all Hakka, or "guest people," Hong's clan record shows that his family originated in north China but was pushed progressively southward along China's mountain systems by Central Asian invaders since the fourth century C.E. (The China missionaries thought the Hakka were, in fact, one of the lost tribes of Israel.) By the time they began settling pockets of rocky hillside land arcing from northeastern Guangdong to neighboring southeastern Guangxi province in the early eighteenth century, the most fertile acreage was already owned by the original settlers, called Bendi. A few Hakka, including Hong's own family, did own small plots, but most were tenants on the least productive upland fields of Bendi landlords.

During their hilltop migrations, the Hakka had learned to grow such New World crops as peanuts and sweet potato. But they had to supplement their meager farm income through handicraft-making and such Bendi-despised jobs as mining, blacksmithing, stone masonry, charcoal burning, grass cutting, indigo production, and barbering. These jobs often took them far from home and even overseas.

The Bendi treated the Hakka as outcasts and belittled their wanderings, poverty, pugnacity, “strange” dialect, and equal treatment of women for debasing Confucian morality. But to the Hakka, poverty and mobility were valued for fostering frugality, adaptation, resourcefulness, innovation, entrepreneurship, risk-taking, honesty, and the inclusive, self-reliant, property-sharing communities which sustained them in a hostile world. Poverty kept the Hakka monogamous. Nor did they take their women, whom they esteemed as indispensable partners in survival, out of farm work and market activities by binding their feet as other Chinese did. When violence erupted between Hakka and Bendi over land and water rights, the Hakka’s guerilla tactics served them well.

The Hakka — who were, in fact, Han Chinese with origins in the Yellow River cradle of Chinese civilization — believed themselves to be the inheritors and guardians of China’s ancient traditions. Stubbornly resistant to calls for their assimilation, they refused to take part in southern Bendi culture, which they condemned as arrogant, materialistic, and addicted to gambling and opium smoking.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the dignity of manual labor, the Hakka also treasured mental labor. Speaking a uniform dialect understood by all Hakka throughout China, enjoying a disproportionately high literacy rate, and devoted to education, a significant number of Hakka had moved up the socioeconomic ladder by obtaining government posts through success in the civil service examination. Hong himself was academically precocious and aspired to elevate his family’s status in this way. But repeated examination failures and exposure to Protestant missionary writings mediated through a Bendi evangelist inspired Hong’s 1837 dream in which God, whom he called “Heavenly Father,” denounced Confucius and commissioned Hong (whom he identified as Jesus’ younger brother) to return China to monotheism, peace, and equality. Hong immediately erected a wooden tablet inscribed with the words “Heavenly Father” (*Tianfu*) and venerated it as Hakka do their founding lineage ancestors.<sup>2</sup>

## *Envisioning the Heavenly Kingdom*

In his theological writings, Hong lamented the Hakka’s worsening situation after the First Opium War of 1839–42, which he attributed to economic competition in the wake of increasing globalization, rising unemployment, and falling farm production because of the tripling of China’s population during two centuries of Manchu rule. He also condemned Bendi confiscation of the Hakka’s fields in the effort to consolidate landholding as well as rising crime rates amid increasing opium addiction and Manchu government corruption. He blamed these problems on China’s rejection of the universal Heavenly Father revealed in the foreigners’ Bible and in China’s pre-Confucian books.

The latter, he argued, proved that God was China's creator, common ancestor, and emperor benevolently ruling an ancient commonwealth of "great peace and equality" (both terms are summed up by the phrase *taiping*). As "brothers" and "sisters," God's worshipful children had shared equally in the fruits of creation, he insisted. Tragically, Hong charged, Confucius omitted God from his editing of the Chinese classics. Worse, China's emperors had usurped God's rule, jettisoned morality for the localized, paper-tiger deities of the Bendi's "decadent" Daoism and Buddhism, and polarized Chinese society by abandoning God's "universal love" for Confucius' "partial love," which pitted Chinese against Chinese. Hong insisted that China could be saved only by restoring the Heavenly Father's rule within the universal theocratic Kingdom of Heaven described in the missionaries' preaching.

Early in 1847, Hong studied Christianity in Canton with the Rev. Issachar Jacox Roberts, an American Baptist missionary from Tennessee, who had pioneered missions among the Hakka. He then went to Guangxi province to organize recent Hakka migrants lacking local lineage connections into "God Worshipper" congregations devoted to a "moral revival" based on biblically- and Hakka-inspired ideals and to mutual support in hard times. He imposed the Ten Commandments to outlaw specific "sins" against God (idol worship and witchcraft), community (the murder, banditry, and ethnic feuding which had taken their toll on the Hakka), and self (Bendi-promoted promiscuity, commercialism, gambling, and addiction to alcohol, tobacco, and opium), and he generated spiritual anxiety by promising recompense in Heaven or Hell.

Between 1848 and 1850, God Worshipper ranks mushroomed as Hong linked Jesus' New Testament healing miracles with Hakka shamanism (which sustained the Hakka through centuries of perilous migration) to combat drought and typhus. Through such Hakka mediums as Yang Xiuqing (an illiterate charcoal-burner), God, Jesus, and the Holy Ghost daily appeared to inspire revivalist fervor through congregational faith healing, speaking in tongues, and millennial speculation. And he opened the "Sacred Treasury," a Hakka-style community chest into which land-poor God Worshipppers contributed their possessions, to Hakka, Bendi, and non-Han minorities alike. Hong considered all people equal as "daughters" and "sons" of the same Heavenly Father.

By the spring of 1850, the Manchu court, convinced that the God Worshipppers' loyalty to God above emperor would catapult Hong's moral campaign into political insurrection, attacked his flock. Hong countered by announcing, on January 11, 1851, the inauguration of the "Heavenly Kingdom of Great Peace" (*Taiping Tianguo*) in which, he promised, the strong would "no more oppress the weak, the many overwhelm the few, the wise delude the simple, and the bold annoy the fearful." He invited *all* of China's subjects to unite with his 20,000 God Worshipppers into an army of

“Chosen People” whom God Himself would deliver, Exodus-like, from the oppression of the “devil Manchus,” foreign rulers whom the patriotic Hakka had always despised and whom God would vanquish.

God Himself would reach the individual believer through a religious-military-civilian theocracy capped on earth by Hong and his subordinate “brother kings.” The Ten Commandments became the rules of engagement portraying God as a warrior-judge in whose name summary execution created disciplined soldiers of both sexes, the Hakka women militia every bit as adept at guerrilla fighting as the men. On the march, the Taipings destroyed “idolatrous” temples and ancestral shrines, sang hymns, and — willing to endure any suffering — exulted: “Our Heavenly Father helps us, and no one can fight with him.” Before battle, they knelt and recited the Lord’s Prayer, cleaving to its promise of “Thy kingdom come.”



Woodblock print of a Taiping leader, which some Western observers mistakenly assumed was a likeness of Hong Xiuquan.

As the Taipings swept into the Yangzi River valley at Wuhan, far from the Hakka stronghold of Guangdong and Guangxi, promises of heavenly bliss and posthumous rank inspired a string of rebel victories. Thousands of landless peasants sought baptism as Taiping preachers unveiled Hong’s “Land System of the Heavenly Dynasty,” perhaps the highest embodiment of the Hakka-inspired Taiping vision. Claiming that the Heavenly Father owned the world’s land, Hong promised that China’s farmland would be redistributed, including to women, who would, for the first time in Chinese history, receive equal amounts of similarly-productive acreage as men. Claiming state power as the vehicle of God’s love, Hong ordered its extension to the local “congregation” of 25 families. At this, the lowest level of government administration ever proposed in China, a God-fearing Hakka “sergeant” would provide ethical governance by preaching, teaching school to boys and girls alike, adjudicating law cases, providing social services, overseeing the equal distribution of the annual harvests, and supervising military training.

## *The Rise and Fall of “New Jerusalem”*

In March 1853, one million Taipings captured Nanjing, the former Ming dynasty capital. Hong renamed the city “New Jerusalem.” Revealing himself to be the reincarnated Melchizedek (the messianic priest-king who anticipated David in the Old Testament and Christ in the New), Hong sought to transform the city into a Hakka utopia, immediately banning such “Bendi-inspired” practices as footbinding, concubinage, arranged marriage, wife purchase, widow suicide, and prostitution. And he decreed women’s equal access to education, government, and military service. He mandated monogamy, nationalized private property and commerce into a vast Sacred Treasury, prohibited work on the Sabbath, and — reflecting the Hakka’s long-standing concern for literacy training — democratized education and literacy through Hakka-style vernacular language simplification. Hong’s own writings and the Taiping Bible (which Hong edited and annotated) replaced the Confucian classics as the Taipings’ doctrinal foundation.

In September 1856, thousands of Taipings perished in an internecine bloodbath over who spoke for God: Hong, God’s “Second Son,” or Yang, the Hakka shaman. This fratricidal catastrophe and Hong’s subsequent retreat into mysticism crippled military coordination at the very moment Qing forces were stretched thin fighting other rebels throughout China. Taiping commanders would never again control more than the lower Yangzi provinces, an area the size of Texas. Unable to muster sufficient administrative resources to implement the communal Land System, the Taipings were forced to fall back on the old system of gentry landownership and tax collection. And over time, moral discipline began to wane among troops in the field.

In 1859, Hong approved proposals of the “Shield King,” his cousin Hong Rengan, a baptized Christian catechist much admired by missionaries in Hong Kong and Shanghai. The Shield King sought to link Taiping China with the Christian West through adoption of Protestant Christianity; Western-style democracy; social service, welfare, and philanthropic institutions; industrial development; and China’s integration into the global economy. But Taiping court factionalism doomed this effort. Nor was support forthcoming from Hong’s “brother” missionaries, who condemned his religious synthesis as “abominable in the sight of God.” In fact, Western governments — fearing that Hong’s call for China’s global equality would jeopardize the opium trade and their one-sided commercial privileges in China — supplied Qing forces with European and American mercenaries and matériel. This proved lethal to the Taipings.<sup>3</sup>

In July 1864, well-trained Chinese troops of the loyalist Zeng Guofan breached Nanjing’s wall and leveled “New Jerusalem.” Mopping up operations stretched into 1866. Facing certain execution at home, Taiping survivors sought refuge abroad in Southeast Asia, India, Africa, Europe, the Caribbean, and the Americas.

Hong's millennial quest, which consumed between 20 and 40 million lives in 16 of China's 18 provinces, was the world's bloodiest civil war and the threshold of modern China. The Taipings held onto their urban Promised Land of New Jerusalem for 11 years. In this, China's longest-surviving rebel utopia, the Taipings carried out unprecedented socio-economic experiments along Hakka lines.

To be sure, the Taiping Revolution inherited much from the rich Chinese secret society and sectarian activism since the late Ming dynasty. In ethnically-complex and anarchic areas like Guangdong and its Guangxi hinterland — where dynastic control was weakest and foreign influence strongest — charismatic leaders often reacted to economic catastrophe and moral decline by condemning the orthodox order and gathering marginalized converts into salvationist congregations along ethnic, religious, and economic fault-lines. These groups often flared into such nineteenth-century insurrections as the White Lotus, Miao, Muslim, and Nian rebellions. But the Daoist and Buddhist utopian visions which inspired them lacked a timetable and a plan for a new order. Nor did these rebels ever reject Confucianism or go beyond replacing one morally-bankrupt dynasty with a virtuous new one.

The Taipings, on the other hand, far surpassed this rebel tradition. Their Hakka ideals and practices attracted the dispossessed, rationalized the puritanism which disciplined them, and shaped the theocratic organization which propelled them. Hong also preached China's equality with Western brothers and sisters, even inserting the line "bless brothers and sisters of all nations" in his revision of the Lord's Prayer.

In the end, the Bendi landowning elite denounced the Taipings' heresy and remained loyal to the alien Manchus and the Confucian orthodoxy for another half century. Even Hakka Christians (the Hakka becoming Christian in far greater numbers than did other Chinese) denounced what they saw as the Taipings' "Christian heresy."<sup>4</sup>



Seal of the Taiping "Heavenly Dynasty," affirming that God Himself is the emperor of China and Hong Xiuquan ("Heavenly King") His subordinate.

## Sun Yatsen, a Hakka, and the 1911 Revolution

Despite the Manchu's horrific slaughter of Hakka innocents — even those without Taiping connections — after 1864, the Taiping Revolution inspired Dr. Sun Yatsen, a Christian Hakka physician who had been taught in the village school by a veteran Taiping soldier and who called himself “Hong Xiuquan the second,” to overthrow the Manchus, destroy the dynastic system, and transform China into a democratic republic. To be sure, his “Three People's Principles” of nationalism, democracy and the “people's welfare” — through which he sought to knit together a fragmented China, which he described as a “loose heap of sand” — are indebted to Abraham Lincoln's “government of, by, and for the people.” But their deepest inspiration is rooted in the Hakka's dedication to community over native place, egalitarian institutions, and the economic leveling and community services which Sun insisted should provide for the people's well-being. This Hakka vision of a new China based on national unity was shared by the growing numbers of overseas Chinese who supplied the funds to enable Sun to overthrow the Qing government in 1911. And Sun's best revolutionary troops were Hakka.<sup>5</sup>

## Communist Revolution and the Hakka Legacy

Although Sun toppled 2500 years of imperial rule, he died before he could implement his beloved “Three People's Principles.” Chiang Kai-shek, who married Sun's Hakka sister-in-law, Soong Mei-ling, said he admired the Taipings, claimed Sun's charismatic mantle, united the country through military force, and initiated an industrial revolution. But it was Mao Zedong (perhaps a Hakka himself, although the jury is still out on that conjecture) who, relying on agrarian-based revolution and a great deal of Hakka support, took China into the next stage of revolution.

According to Professor Mary Erbaugh<sup>6</sup> three of the 12 founding members of the Chinese Communist Party in 1921 were Hakka. And six of Mao's nine base areas in southeast China — the same kind of hard-scrabble spawning ground that gave rise to the God Worshippers a century earlier — intersected with 33 pure and 150 mixed Hakka districts. Mao relied on the Hakka and their traditional strengths: mobility, intrepid women, military prowess, and a strategically-useful common language. A Hakka-operated underground railway — using Hakka as a secret language (similar to the use of Navajo during World War II) — supported a sophisticated intelligence network throughout these Soviets. Hakka women, long a familiar sight walking along the hillsides to market, did extensive reconnaissance and effective guerrilla fighting.

When the Long March, so reminiscent of the Taiping Exodus, began in October 1934, Zhu De, the venerable Hakka Red Army commander, assisted by Marshal Ye



Jianying, another Hakka, confiscated and redistributed land for community farming as the Taipings had earlier done in the same area. In ways reminiscent of the God Worshipper congregations, they mobilized peasants into women's, literacy, education, health, and militia programs, while employing such Taiping-sounding slogans as "down with footbinding," "abolish concubinage," "promote male-female equality," and "don't adopt a baby bride for your baby son."

On October 1, 1949, a victorious Mao Zedong declared that China had finally "stood up" to foreign aggression and the abusive old order. His reforms incorporated many Taiping precedents. The first legislative action of the People's Republic of China was, in fact, to make women legally equal to men and to mandate monogamy. And although the Hakka make up only three percent of China's population, they were three times more likely to occupy high government and party positions in the new regime than were other Han Chinese.

Mao was grateful for the Hakka's support of the revolution. Yet he ultimately sought to downplay ethnic distinctions and local characteristics which he thought would militate against national cohesion. For this reason, official Chinese sources refrained from using the term "Hakka" until after Deng Xiaoping, himself a Hakka from Sichuan province, came to power. According to Erbaugh, the term Hakka debuted in the *People's Daily* in 1991 as part of Deng's effort to attract overseas Hakka investment in China. With sixty Hakka research centers recently created in China, the Hakka's history is no longer, in Erbaugh's word, "secret." And the contributions to Asia's rise of such outstanding leaders as the Hakka Lee Kwan Yew, founding father of independent Singapore, and Lee Teng-hui, the Hakka former president of Taiwan, are increasingly well known.

In 1984, fully one-half of the Politburo's Standing Committee were Hakka. Now, however, no Hakka remain in that body. Yet the Hakka vision is still essential to the on-going process of remaking China. In 2001, China joined the World Trade Organization in order to accelerate its global economic integration. The Taiping Shield King, Hong Rengan, had proposed a similar idea 140 years earlier, long before it was adopted by the Qing government. One consequence of exposing China to today's international market competition, however, is the burgeoning rich-poor gap in the wake of rising unemployment among bankrupt state-owned factories, a "floating population" of 125 million underemployed peasants, and official corruption which consumes as much as 13–17% of GDP.

Like the Taipings, the Chinese government today is retreating from its revolutionary ideals. Yet in the face of the country's growing desire to create a civil society, enlarge its non-profit sector, and strengthen public morality amid the erosion of Mao's socialist vision, the Hakka's communitarian message of equality and interdependence is more relevant than ever to China's and the world's future.

Despite their transition from manual to mental labor, growing prosperity, and pre-eminence in politics, the professions, business, and other fields around the world, the Hakka are always crossing borders, emigrating toward that ever-more promising land. As China fast becomes the world's next economic superpower, its biggest challenge will be coping with the many complexities of globalization. As it slips the bonds of its current, narrow nationalism, China will need the guidance of time-honored Hakka universalism, which favors unity and loyalty to the whole community over the confines of native place. The multilingual, adaptive, change-conscious, and worldwide Hakka are China's bridge to the global community and can help all of us understand the true significance of Sun Yat-sen's favorite saying: "The whole world is a single commonwealth" (*tianxia weigong*).

*P. Richard Bohr is Professor of History and Director of Asian Studies. An earlier version of this essay was delivered as a plenary address at the 2008 International Hakka Conference in Toronto, Ontario, June 29, 2008.*

## Notes

1. For an overview of the Hakka, see Nicole Constable, ed., *Guest People: Hakka Identity in China and Abroad*. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996.
2. For a biography of Hong, see Jonathan D. Spence, *God's Chinese Son: The Taiping Heavenly Kingdom of Hong Xiuquan*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1996.
3. For an analysis of the Taiping vision, see P. Richard Bohr, "The Taipings in Chinese Sectarian Perspective," in Kwang-Ching Liu and Richard Shek, eds., *Heterodoxy in Late Imperial China*. Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2004, pp. 393–430.
4. For a history of Hakka Christians, see Nicole Constable, *Christian Souls and Chinese Spirits: A Hakka Community in Hong Kong*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994 and Jessie G. Lutz and Rolland Ray Lutz, *Hakka Chinese Confront Protestant Christianity, 1850–1900*. Armonk: M. E. Sharp, 1998.
5. See C. Martin Wilbur, *Sun Yat-sen: Frustrated Patriot*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1976.
6. Mary S. Erbaugh, "The Secret History of the Hakkas: The Chinese Revolution as a Hakka Enterprise," *The China Quarterly*, 132:937–969 (December 1992).